

Brother Basilio Rueda Guzmán

To be a Christian today!¹

Introduction

In a world dominated by materialism, individualism, hedonism and lack of solidarity and a world in which the values of the Catholic Church are questioned, we need models who are close to us and who show us that it is possible to be a saint in spite of a milieu hostile to all that is spiritual and transcendent. We need models who tell us that Jesus is , today and always, the center of our life, able to respond to the aspirations of every human being.

Brother Basilio Rueda Guzmán's life was a praise to the Lord, a hymn to the works of His hands. His union with God broke the molds of the overwhelming activism which invades us and it propelled him towards the service of people, in spite of dominating egoism. His spiritual life was a road of progressive giving to God and to his Brothers in the years which followed Vatican II and which were to prepare the faithful to take part in the renewal of the Church and religious life.

One day he understood that he could be a Marist Brother and he set to work to become one in spite of his father's hostility. That exacted of him many hours of fasting, tears, insistent prayers to the Virgin Mary to whom he professed a singular devotion from earliest childhood.

When his goal was attained, his life took the road to holiness, as Marcellin Champagnat used to say: "To become a Brother is to undertake to become a saint!" Brother Basilio took this ideal very seriously and struggled all his life to make it a reality.

From his first steps in religious life he had the good fortune to meet an excellent spiritual director among the chaplains in the house of formation of Querétaro. It's in this house that he made his apostolic formation.

A man seduced by Jesus Christ

In agreement with his spiritual director, he carried his resolutions in a little notebook. Among them we find: "To conform myself progressively to the image of Jesus Christ and I will obtain this by loving His person, in true obedience, in total poverty, in virginity of heart, under the action of the Holy Spirit." "I want my life to be a cry of love towards You, Who are my all. May my entire being tell You, Lord, that I want to live for You, that I love You, because You are infinitely, lovable, because You are immensely worthy of love. Make me understand that love so that I can love You more and more." "Jesus, lead me down the path of Your saints, even if this means immolation, humiliation, poverty, in a word, suffering and the cross. Do not abandon me to my own strength, make me belong totally to You, become my master, make me burn with love of You."

According to the testimony of those who knew him, Brother Basilio's heart was seduced by Jesus Christ. He insisted often on the search for a profound intimacy with the Lord so as to make Him present in all our activity. It was edifying to see him in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. In his retreat agenda for 1986² he wrote: "Everything impels me to center my attention and love on the marvelous person of Jesus Christ, Whom I want to know. That's the grace I ask for unceasingly."

In the pilgrimage he made to the Holy Land after his two terms as Superior General he had the habit of going to Calvary and the Mount of Olives to pray, accompanied by a priest friend.³ There he would remove his shoes, put them aside and, kneeling, he would spend long hours, motionless, in deep contemplation. Every day he would spend an hour in adoration, in spite of a tight work schedule. He never spent any day without taking part in the Eucharist, the focus of his day. He was convinced that "the first hours of the day are for the Lord."

When he was with the Movement for a Better World⁴ in Quito, Ecuador, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who welcomed the Coordination team, said, "Before dawn he was already in the chapel, and he would stay there hours with the Lord and the Virgin Mary. His experience of God was his greatest richness and we would notice this in his relations with people, unconcerned about their faith or social status. He was a man of God, a total disciple of Jesus, a person seduced by the Gospel. One day he told a group of young people: "It's worth living for an ideal, and no ideal is as passionate as Jesus Christ!"

In an interview he gave to a religious magazine he said: "One day I understood that God had made His love tangible in the person of His Son, and Jesus was like the kiss of love and tenderness which the Father was giving us... That day I understood that Jesus was speaking to me particularly, because He made me understand the excellence of His Gospel."

During the spiritual retreat in his Sabbatical Year he wrote in his agenda: "The Lord gives me one of the most beautiful meditations of my life. It's an ineffable grace. From every single verse there gush forth not only torrents of affection and love, but of light, a light like no other that I've ever received in my life. I understand the call, the call made to me, like an act of tenderness from Christ. But it is not to claim Him for me alone; it is rather to send me to the heart and thoroughfares of the world to cry out: 'Be consoled!' but with a new value and tone. It is now that I grasp what my consecration demands and my duty to live by paying the heavy price and of reciprocal grace, also paid for heavily."

A contemplative man

Someone who knew Brother Basilio from having worked with him put it this way: "His union with God is a secret between him and God, even though we could have glimpses of it in his conduct, his writings, as well as in the fraternal life he created in the General Council." As for his overflowing life, Brother Basilio used to say after he retired: "This strikes me as a small paradise of peace with its vast space for prayer." He advised a Brother who was complaining of not having time for prayer: "Let me tell you that it is not

time which you do not have, but love. Nothing will make us more sensitive to the world and its needs than to see it with the eyes of Jesus and for that we have to have Him in our mind and in our heart.” On another occasion he recognized: “Sometimes I get to four o’clock in the morning and I think that it’s not worth going to bed for one hour. So I go to the chapel for a moment of adoration.”

Brother Basilio did the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius at Cuernavaca in April 1986. The Jesuit priest⁵ who was with him can say: “My testimony is the result of thirty days of spiritual direction and intimate contact. Two things impressed me deeply: the first is the gift of prayer. His prayer was profound, original, sincere and spontaneous. It revealed a man possessed by God. Never did he show having had a moment of aridity or boredom, on the contrary. His reverence was such that I could see a profound familiarity with God. Furthermore, he made a general confession such that it edified me and allowed me to note how much the Lord had finely formed his soul.”⁶

In the course of that same retreat he writes: “I pray, I make an effort and after a half-hour I enter into a very rich contemplation. The last fifty minutes are minutes of strong union with the suffering Lord, a contemplation of his terrible sufferings. The example of the Good Thief deeply impressed me... It’s wonderful to believe in Jesus when almost everybody else has given up the faith.”

A man attentive to do the will of God

Brother Basilio’s prayer did not consist of fine speeches, nor of moments of silence, but of an ardent search for the will of God. He would affirm, in fact: “Love the will of God and never fear it, since the will of God is lovable because He loves us.” On another occasion he made the following comment: “The world today is knocking at the door of our Institute. God wants us not to shut the door. May the glory of God and the honor of the Virgin Mary be our only goal and entire enterprise.”

He understood that the Kingdom of God is life, love, justice. Many Brothers are convinced that his whole life was one of work and exhaustion for the Kingdom of God. He was a deeply spiritual man, with a very strong sense of God. He lived in constant touch with Him. On one occasion he wrote: “God doesn’t want me to seek my personal fulfillment at my brother’s expense. What God wants is that we love one another as brothers and that we become saints together.” At the beginning of one retreat he proposed what follows: “To review my life according to the will of God. I want absolutely that my will be subjected to the will of God.”

“In listening attentively to God,” he would say, “is born the dialogue which makes the vehement need to proclaim with life that God is fullness of love and that He is worth losing all in order to possess Him erupt. This is where we find the source of the passionate search for the will of God, in a necessary and generous ecclesial communion, in love of truth, to find new paths of evangelization. He who has known the fascination of the love of God knows that he no longer belongs to himself... The will of God goes first, before self, and desire is reduced to total availability.”

In the Exercises of Saint Ignatius he notes: “I see that God is besieging me for ‘unconditional surrender’. It is difficult to put in one paragraph all that that implies in following my vocation, my life and my retreat. It’s a matter of reorganization in order to lead it really to the summit. I guess that’s very serious and very appealing, but I remain at peace. If I fall into a trap, it’s the trap of God. What better thing could happen to me? What could I desire more?” In his last sickness and to his last breath he never ceased to submit himself to the will of God. “I sense great peace and feel totally abandoned to God. For myself, in the circumstances in which I find myself, I want only the holy will of God. Nobody can love me more than He and nobody knows more than He what is best for us... I know there are no better hands than His, and it’s in them I have put myself. I don’t pray for my health, but that the will of God be done until the end.” Someone who was accompanying him in these moments told us: “On his deathbed, with exemplary resignation and a smile on his lips, he was leading us to God by his example of total gift to the will of God.” His last words were: “Thy will be done,” and those of Charles de Foucauld whom he greatly admired: “Father, I commend myself to You, do with me what You want...” He had already stated resolutely: “The will of God, whatever it be and which I accept without discussion, must be the last word and the source of peace.”

A man filled with love of the Church

He used to affirm, speaking of fidelity: “We must be faithful to God, to the Church, to people, and to ourselves; we cannot fail God.” He would insist frequently that we must be faithful to God, the Spirit, and the Church. He did not limit himself to the Marist community; on the contrary, he would advise the Brothers to become part of the three dimensions of the Church: the parish, the diocese, and the universal Church. Fidelity to the Church was one of his characteristics, and in his talks, conferences and writings he used to state that with contagious conviction.

On a certain occasion he was heard to say: “If some religious congregation had to be saved I would save ours first of all, for which I feel a deep love; but if we had to sacrifice a congregation to save the Church, I would want it to be my Institute and I would want to die and be buried with it.”

For many years he served the Church in the Movement for a Better World and, after that, in the Union of Major Superiors and, sometimes on a particular point, as participant in the Synod on the Family or as consultant to the Sacred Congregation of Religious. One of the Superiors General affirms: “Brother Basilio was a support and a guarantee for those who wanted to renew the consecrated life according to the orientations of the Church. Faithful administrator of the gifts of God, he was a true disciple of Christ in his Church.” In the Synod on the Family he declared something which drew attention powerfully: “I believe we have to listen. Families have much to tell us.”

Our attention has been called to the fact that Brother Basilio, in his evangelical work in the world and the Church, embraced many domains of the apostolate: with priests and religious, yes, but he also showed a special predilection for lay people in the various

organizations with which he came into contact. At the death of Brother Basilio the president of the Movement for a Better World and Brother's former co-worker said, "I remember him with affection for his love of the Church, his love of the Institute, his loyalty and sincerity, his coherence and goodness, and his openness to all the new things of the Spirit and the renewal of the Church."

On Brother Basilio the thought of the Bishop of Velletri was the following: "I knew that he was a reliable author on the spiritual and ascetic life, and it was with joy that I read his books on prayer, religious community, fraternal charity, drawing from them light and strength and spiritual benefit."

During one of his conferences a listener commented: "I was flabbergasted. Here in front of us we had a man who showed a true passion for the Church, for religious life and his congregation." Brother Basilio himself recognized: "Every day I find more reasons to live the life I have embraced with a stronger attachment for the Institute that I feel very alive in me, and also for the Church which I love more and more every day."

A Brother among Brothers

If there is one point on which everybody agrees when speaking of Brother Basilio it is clearly to speak of his love for his community and for every person, Christian or not, who happened to come his way. He loved everybody in a concrete way, and everybody felt loved as if they were unique. When there was question of helping somebody he took all the means necessary. He had like a maternal concern for the health of others,. And we are not exaggerating. He had a love of his brother or sister to a rare extent. He was even able to die to save the other, giving himself up as Jesus did. His great thoughtfulness made him close to everybody and his charity became compassion. He was always attentive to lend his help and to speak a word of comfort. Here's how somebody put it: "I found a man to whom I could entrust myself totally without being let down, somebody who understood, who strengthened, who knew how to put himself in your place."

The old Brothers will always remember his tenderness and sensitivity; the young Brothers, his deep understanding and the help they found even when it did not agree with their conduct. After his reelection for nine more years as Superior General he told the Brothers at the end of the Chapter: "Tell all the Brothers I love them and I am going to put myself at their service with all my strength."

He used to serve his Brothers with a smile on his lips, without giving them the impression that they were being served. He never gave any indication of inattention and he never ceased to interest himself in what we were saying or confiding to him; he remained at the beck and call of everybody, as long as was necessary. His style of fraternal welcome and gift of himself were not sporadic but a natural and ordinary way to behave.

He sensed a deep preoccupation for the Brothers in crisis in their vocation and who asked him to be dispensed from their Vows. Before sending the request on to the Vatican, he would once again study each case with the Procurator attached to the Holy See. To the

Brother in crisis he would then ask the following: "Would you want to continue to be a Brother?" If the answer was affirmative and sincere, he would move heaven and earth to obtain for that Brother the possibility of redoing his life, offering him all the psychological helps and spiritual direction, or else, courses on prayer, or further accompaniment.

One day when he was passing through a city in Spain he inquired about the cousin of a Brother who was already dead and whom he knew. She had cancer and Brother asked that we take him to her to visit her. The lady was so comforted by the visit that she couldn't find the words to thank him for such thoughtfulness. On another occasion, when he was Master of Novices at Morelia, he welcomed and took care of a man from Chiapas during his convalescence, showering him with care and affection. During a visit to the Brothers in Nairobi he visited a leprosarium run by religious Sisters. There was a woman there with neither hands nor feet and who was blind and deaf besides. We asked this woman to sing for her visitors and she did, thanking God for His gifts. Brother Basilio was profoundly moved and embraced and kissed this woman.

One Brother has left us this testimony: "We had left the Second Novitiate in Spain and we were headed for another city. It was nighttime. In a ditch along the road we saw a man stretched out. Brother Basilio asked the driver to stop and we took this man to our house until he completely recovered. The man returned home three days later."

Before the XIXth General Chapter Brother Basilio returned to Africa on a trip of Solidarity. In a community of Brothers in Tanzania he took care of a child whose head was covered with sores because of infection. This child had formerly not let himself be cared for by anybody, but Brother Basilio, even not knowing the language, managed to care for him. Every day he took on the task of cleaning the sores with gentleness, and he did this as long as he stayed in that school.

A man with a great spirit of Faith

In an ecumenical group in Mexico City that Brother Basilio belonged to somebody said of him: "He used to dialogue using the language of his interlocutors and he used to impress non-believers in the group by the way he presented the faith, but he struck people especially by his witness and the way he presented relating to God." Brother Basilio's faith was like a solid rock on which the edifice of his spiritual life was cemented and built. It is from faith that burst out that love which was seen in his behavior and in the warmth of his words, in his prayers and the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and still more in the celebration of the Eucharist.

His prayer life, his profound trust in God, his great love for the Most Holy Virgin, the peace, the joy and the magnificent accompaniment of his Brothers were proofs of his faith. It was not rare to see him in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament, very simply and with an admirable devotion. In the most difficult moments of the history of the Institute his unshakable faith in Providence steadied him at the head of his Brothers when they needed it the most.

He wanted all the Brothers to live in peace. He used to say that you could not really serve God if it wasn't in joy and faith. He would insist: "It is possible to be faithful!" And that's the way he himself was: faithful, holy, happy, jokester.

His spirit of faith and great trust in Providence were clearly seen. He believed firmly in the efficacy of prayer when it involved a mission guaranteed by obedience.

He was a man of deep faith who stayed serene in the midst of dispensations from Vows, the mistakes or impatience of many Brothers who, after the Council, wanted immediate reforms. Though a third of the Brothers of the Congregation abandoned religious life during his terms, he remained unshakable and always knew how to keep the same enthusiasm. He was sure God's work would continue in spite of the storms. Those were turbulent times for the Church and all religious congregations, ours included. Brother Basilio did not let himself falter and he put in motion what he himself called "the process of re-founding the Institute."

A man of great strength

Brother Basilio showed an evenness of temper during the vicissitudes of those times, putting his trust in Providence. His profound interior life allowed him to confront serenely the misadventures of so many people affected by the insecurity of difficult times. He lived without letting himself be carried away by the problems of others or of his own congregation. He never let himself be discouraged by the steady decline in the number of Brothers. In spite of enormous work he was never seen to change; evenness of temper was like the shadow of his person, like a friend walking by his side.

One of his novices noticed that he was suffering for some time, but remained happy; he didn't moan until he really could go on no more. He never complained, he continued to live, to serve, loving us and serving us in all things. Another novice said: "What I admired the most was his patience, his understanding, his love, --more by his example than by his words,-- the way he treated us, so much like family, and the joy he always showed."

To study, pray, relax, listen to music, do the dishes, play cards, plan trips, he did all that with full attention; he lived each moment intensely, attentive to others. He combined strength and sweetness, prudence and boldness, respect for good traditions and creativity, not only for what concerned structures but even in his grasp of the spiritual life and in the organization of the whole Institute.

Whoever lived with Brother Basilio knows that he never surrendered to fatigue or sickness. He gave the impression that pain and suffering were natural to him. "But for me," said one Brother who saw him on his bed of pain, "I could not stand seeing the suffering which showed on his face, in spite of his efforts to control it."

During his sickness Brother Basilio said that the most difficult times were when he had to pray, because of the pills and tubes. However, he would offer his sufferings for the Institute, for the Church which had been so generous to him and his novices.

A prudent man

When in the course of the XVIIth General Chapter the fact of his reelection became possible, Brother Basilio called his personal doctor in Madrid from Rome to know if the state of his health permitted him to take on a second term. The doctor tells us what happened: “We talked for some time and he asked me, ‘Do you think I can do it physically?’ I answered him, ‘I think you can.’ And he completed his second term without major complications. If I had told him no, he would have accepted just the same because he was ready to sacrifice himself for everybody and he was always ready to serve, given that the trust the Congregation put in him counted heavily.”

Though the Institute was polarized because of the new currents of renewal, there were never any group confrontations; this was due to the great sense of optimism of Brother Basilio and his trust and strength in the worst moments.

He was a man who, before giving an answer, had already talked with God and he accepted the other’s point of view, even if he didn’t always agree. Contact with him and proximity to him led to prayer, and prayer led to the true knowledge which comes from God.

He was a man who respected the conscience of others. To the Brothers in Africa, in the most difficult moments of the war, he left total liberty to stay put or to return to their country of origin. In complicated situations he knew how to apply the principles of morality and discernment. He was a clear and precise guide, and he wanted the regional superiors to be the same. He knew how to unite three difficult principles of government: respect for the person, the demands of the religious vocation, and the role of authority in making decisions. He approached all matters with wisdom, patience and sympathy and he looked for the best solution.

He knew how to avoid extremely dangerous pitfalls, like following an excessively conservative line of action or losing control before an overture which permitted new experiences which could have provoked division and confusion. His aptitude in getting information and asking for information, opportune help and advice, kept him in constant touch with the General Council.

There was never any haste in his decisions and if, for lack of information or the bad will of people, he made a decision not really right, he corrected it and, if necessary, asked pardon and changed direction.

He knew how to have everyone face his responsibilities, calling him to a conscientious and mature life and to the fulfillment of his Vows. He knew how to do this by word and example, always looking for a solution.

Brother Basilio lived and died as a helmsman, like a captain with a firm hand but a heart filled with goodness. He knew why and for whom he lived, why and for whom he worked, and in whose hands he died.

A humble man

With his ability to organize, his vast knowledge, his prudence in discernment and the admiration people had for him, Brother Basilio always kept a simple heart, modest and humble. “His humility,” acknowledges someone⁷ who lived with him during a spiritual retreat, “was constant, like his life of prayer. I had before me an exceptional man, and yet he was very natural and very simple. He was a man who was simplified and transparent. I noticed his humility was like a very delicate nuance which the Holy Spirit had formed in him.”

Humility led Brother Basilio to do chores which nobody or very few expected of a Superior General, like washing clothes, doing the dishes, sweeping his office, taking on the suitcases of travelers, waiting on tables.

It was not rare to see him busy with housework. He had a deep sense of evangelical poverty and the example of his humility attracted people. He said it was inconceivable that a Marist community celebrate Christmas without thinking of the poor. On one of his anniversaries we gave him a tape-recorder so he could study English. He refused it, saying he didn’t need such a machine. He saw to it that nobody lacked what he needed or even what was fitting.

With Brother Basilio the vow of poverty was like the synthesis of the other two. Like Jesus and Mary he stripped himself of everything for the good of others. He was satisfied with what was strictly necessary. He was an example for all of us and a witness to following Christ faithfully.

A priest who knew Brother Basilio put it this way: “I’m told people intend to introduce ‘his cause’. On my part, I never thought of that, and yet, of course! I think saints should be like him. I have no doubt of his holiness, he accomplished his mission with great naturalness, an immense love for the Church, with much responsibility, and a great sense of God.” Another one adds: “The idea that I’ve made of him is that he was a man totally centered on God, simple and without deceit. I never saw so much integrity and self-giving. In my mind and in my heart I have no doubt at all: he was certainly a saint.”

A bishop who had known Brother Basilio in Rome put it this way to a group of Student Brothers: “You have in Brother Basilio an exceptional man. His life is a treasure in the dramatic history of the Church and the post-conciliar world. Brother Basilio is a perfect witness to the Christian life in the second half of the XXth century, and, furthermore, there are his writings which are a treasure of religious and spiritual life.”

Filial love of the Most Holy Virgin

From his infancy Brother Basilio distinguished himself by a tender and filial devotion to the Most Holy Virgin. In the houses of formation his love for our Good Mother, encouraged by some of his formators, became notable. During the celebration of the Marian Year in 1954, when he was Director of the house of formation, he organized with the aspirants to religious life ‘study groups’ to know and love the Virgin Mary more. During his years of apostolate in the Cursillos de Cristiandad he gave conferences on the Virgin Mary, and he did it in such a way that he left his listeners favorably impressed. As Superior General he encouraged all the Brothers to remain faithful to the Marial traditions of the Institute.

His thinking on the Most Holy Virgin was excellent because it was based on a passionate Christianity. His Circular, *New Space for Mary*, was written with a son’s heart and it expressed, so to say, the collective soul of the Marist Brother towards her “who has done everything for us,” as our holy Founder, Marcellin Champagnat, used to say.

Responsible for the Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family, he committed himself totally to making the Mother of God known and loved by those who wanted to share Marist spirituality according to Nazareth.

In his notes on the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius he wrote: “At night, a sweet Marial prayer. A Rosary ‘for my relatives and friends’ and another for a Marial renaissance and for the grace to speak of Mary to the Brothers on day 17 and 18.” In another paragraph he adds: “After supper the Office, and after that while walking, prayer with Mary and the Rosary, recited peacefully in spite of darkness and fatigue, make for a beautiful spiritual moment.”

At the closing of the XXth General Chapter he was unanimously chosen to lead the Marist consecration to the Most Holy Virgin. He composed a beautiful prayer which moved all the capitulants and which he read in front of the statue of Mary.

To conclude...

There is no doubt that a man who incites to generosity, who evokes admiration, can only elicit laudatory commentaries. He was a prophet for his times, an intellectual deeply intelligent, a magnanimous heart who knew no limits, a man wholly master of himself, a mystic in action, an exceptional Superior General, a simple and transparent man who loved jokes and had a great sense of humor, a man of solid and sure spirituality. A simple Brother, who knew both how to receive a doctorate *honoris causa* and put on an apron with joy and great spirit to wash the dishes or sweep the floor. He lived an “ordinary life” which was the will of God, totally sanctified by the grace of God.

Prayer to ask for the canonization Of the Servant of God Basilio Rueda, Marist Brother

O God, Father most good and merciful,

You gave your servant,
 Brother Basilio Rueda Guzmán,
 A heart attentive to the needs of others,
 A tender and filial devotion to our Good Mother,
 And a great passion to spread Your Kingdom.
 We thank You for the precious gift of his life
 To our Marist Family and the Church.

We ask You for the grace
 To raise him to the honors of Your altar,
 And allow us to ask his help
 When sickness or problems torment us.

We ask You today for his intercession...
(mention here the grace wanted)
 So that, freed from our torment,
 We may praise You now and forever.
 We ask You this through Christ, Your Son and our Lord. Amen.
(with permission of the Vicariate of Rome)

¹Translated from the Spanish: *El H. Basilio Rueda Guzmán y las virtudes cristianas*, by Brother José Flores García, Editorial Progreso, 2005, Mexico.

²These are the Exercises of Saint Ignatius which he made in Cuernavaca during his six-month Sabbatical after being Superior General for 18 years, 1967 to 1985. Notebooks 13 and 14 on Brother Basilio record these retreat notes and how the Lord occupied his entire life.

³ This refers to Father Amador Menudo from Seville who accompanied Basilio in his trips as Superior General in the 80's.

⁴ Basilio worked in the Movement for a Better World from the last months of 1960 up to March 1965, and in Ecuador he was in charge of the Movement from April 1963 to March 1965.

⁵This is Father Francisco Migoya whose testimony is recorded in the book *Basilio, another Champagnat*, pp.86 and 88.

⁶The second aspect which struck Father Francisco Migoya was Brother Basilio's great humility.

⁷This is part of the same testimony of Father Francisco Migoya, SJ, who directed Brother Basilio during the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in April 1986.